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ABSTRACT

Many schools employ varied strategies to ensure equitable treatment of African American students and fair and educative disciplinary procedures. This digest reviews successful disciplinary practices. Cross-cultural competence has a role in student-school relationships. Many negative perceptions of difference exist in today's society. Schools can transform their cultures to create hospitable environments for African Americans by communicating expectations that all students can succeed, providing opportunities for success, fostering social skills development, evaluating students for their strengths, and hiring minority teachers. Miscommunication and racial and cultural differences in definitions of good behavior often lead to inequitable punishment of minority students by teachers who do not respect their classroom participation styles. Schools are adopting strategies to prevent discipline problems and to handle existing problems in culturally respectful ways. Schools need written codes of conduct that all students, staff, and parents understand. Before disciplining students, educators should elicit and consider the reasons for their perceived misbehavior. The goals of discipline should be to help students accept personal responsibility for their actions and commit themselves to change. Discipline should model good behavior, not retribution and humiliation. Schools must keep parents apprised of their children's behavior so they can collaborate when help is needed. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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SCHOOL PRACTICES FOR EQUITABLE DISCIPLINE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Providing African Americans, males especially, with an effective public school education has proven to be a nearly intractable problem. Frequently attending underresourced, overcrowded schools, they are apt to feel alienated from, rather than engaged in, the education process. Some do indeed express their discontent through antisocial behavior (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998). Still, African American students believe they are triply disadvantaged: "Unjustly accused, unfairly silenced, and unnecessarily punished" (Sheets & Gay, 1996, p. 89). They are, in fact, far more likely than whites to be suspended (Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2000).

Schools are now realizing that the consequences of discipline disparities based on race can prevent the educational success of an entire category of young people. Thus, many employ a range of strategies to ensure the equitable treatment of African American students specifically, and the fairness and educative value of their discipline procedures in general. This digest presents a brief review of the practices whose success has been demonstrated.

The Role of Cross-Cultural Competence in the Student-School Relationship

The Perception of Difference

U.S. society has long been characterized by ignorance about African American social styles, denigration of African American traditions, and persistent negative and fear-inducing media images of African Americans. Thus, as products of this society, educators may project negative attitudes about African American students and avoid, rather than mentor, them. Teachers may try to control black males more tightly than whites, believing that are not sufficiently disciplined at home (McCadden, 1998). School practices may fail to account for the knowledge, cognitive abilities, culture, and values of African American students. The reasons for the differential treatment of students of color and white students are many and complex, but the result is often the same: African American students may feel encouraged to act out. Moreover, the bad conduct of a white male student is likely to be excused as a one-time slip while an African American youth who similarly misbehaves is labeled a perpetual troublemaker and severely punished, thought by the school that he has nothing to lose by being so classified (Fremon & Hamilton, 1997).

Sadly, many African American youth, males in particular, believe that should they manage to excel in school, despite the obstacles, racism will limit their ability to reap the advantages available to white achievers. So, the students, males in particular, often manage their anxiety by being resistant to cultural norms or even dropping out, thereby confirming for schools the legitimacy of their low expectations for the students (Mahiri, 1998).

The Development of Cross-Cultural Competence

Schools can transform their programs and culture to create a hospitable environment for African Americans by communicating the expectation that all students can succeed; providing them with the opportunity to do so; fostering their development of social skills and self-control strategies; setting criterion-based achievement objectives; and evaluating students for their strengths, not their weaknesses. They can also try to increase the number of African Americans on their teaching staffs, and train existing staff, regardless of race, to master cross-cultural communication skills and teaching strategies and change entrenched ways of dealing with students of color (Brookover, Erickson, & McEvoy, 1996; Dandy, 1990; Ferguson, 2000; Sheets & Gay, 1996).

Behavior Management

Obviously, school disruptions cannot be tolerated. But racial and cultural differences in the definition of good behavior, along with miscommunications, frequently lead to the inequitable punishment of students of color by school personnel who do not respect their style of classroom participation. Further, arbitrary and excessive consequences for minor offenses can develop in *all* students a sense of powerlessness, dependence on authority, and anger that leads to further misbehavior (Gathercoal, 1998).

Schools are beginning to use a number of strategies to prevent many discipline problems and to deal with those that arise while still respecting students' rights and individual differences. In fact, some districts and schools have successfully adopted one of the several research-based comprehensive programs for maintaining a safe and effective school. They include the Gottfredsons' *Program Development Evaluation*, the Canters' *Assertive Discipline* classroom management program, Glasser's *Reality Therapy* program for teachers (all reviewed in Gottfredson, 1990), and Gathercoal's *Judicious Discipline* (Gathercoal, 1998). The practices described below incorporate principles of these programs and additional strategies shown to be successful.

Good Conduct Policies

Schools need a written and widely circulated code of conduct that all students, staff, and parents understand. A classroom code established by teachers is also useful. Rules should be culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate; they should promote student safety, allow adults to model responsibility and respect, reflect democratic principles, and provide for positive reinforcement of good behavior as well as suitable and neutrally-applied sanctions for misbehavior. The message should be clear that students are responsible for their actions (Bever, 1998; Brookover, Erickson, & McEvoy, 1996).

Contextualization of Misbehavior

Before disciplining students, educators should elicit and consider the reasons for their perceived misbehavior, particularly as they relate to racial differences between teachers and students. Doing so demonstrates a teacher's respect for student concerns. It can even uncover information about a problem that the school might help solve, such as the need for educational supports; assis-

tance in securing food and shelter; relief from victimization through bullying; and counseling for trauma, depression, and family difficulties (Gathercoal, 1998).

For example, in class, many African American students speak out loudly and interrupt as a way of showing their interest, or even argue as they press their point; their intention is to participate, not misbehave, although some teachers may consider them disrespectful. Students may engage in certain challenging behaviors common to the African American male adolescent community, not because they want to disrupt the classroom but because they want to demonstrate their rebellion against what they consider a teacher's "power tripping"; lessons they consider irrelevant, racist, or too simplistic; their perception that teachers believe them incapable of achievement; or their inability to keep up with white classmates because of learning or developmental differences (Dandy, 1990; Sheets & Gay, 1996).

Discipline

The goals of discipline, once the need for it is determined, should be to help students accept personal responsibility for their actions, understand why a behavior change is necessary, and commit themselves to change. The discipline measure should model good behavior, not retribution and humiliation, and students should have some control over its nature. Students can help determine discipline policies in general, but specific punishments should be customized (Gathercoal, 1998; Gottfredson, 1990).

Punishment for misbehavior should fit both the infraction and the student's self-esteem, academic, and personal development needs. It should involve restitution and an apology. For example, a graffiti-writing student should be helped to understand why he should clean the dirty wall, and be able to do so when it would not interfere with a school activity nor be seen by other students; should a custodian clean the wall before the student can, the student should offer thanks. A student who is disrespectful to a teacher should be helped to understand why an apology is necessary and devise a personal way of expressing regret. A student who fails to do a homework assignment should be given an opportunity to explain why and develop a plan with his teacher for doing the work as soon as possible.

A great many, but not all, incidents of misbehavior can be dealt with by such student-centered strategies. Rules of conduct should be specific about incidences whose seriousness requires immediate action. An immediate step, designed to maintain classroom order, might be for the teacher to summon an on-site crisis team carefully trained to handle the misbehaving student, probably by removing him for a private discussion (Nimmo, 1998). An option for students who cannot be helped to assimilate into a regular school is an alternative school with both good academic and counseling programs (Gottfredson, 1990).

Parent Involvement Strategies

Schools need to keep parents apprised of their children's behavior, both good and bad, so they can work together when improvement is needed. The staff can provide African American parents with ideas for promoting their children's development through: (1) encouraging their children's learning and self respect; (2) setting behavior limits and disciplining appropriately; (3) establishing high expectations; (4) maintaining strong communication lines; (5) promoting positive identification as a male or female and as an African American; (6) teaching them to resist violence and other urban temptations; and (7) taking advantage of community resources (Hrabowski et al., 1998).

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